Kathleen M. Fernandez

Zoar Village State Memorial

The Pilgrims were not the only settlers who came to America seeking religious freedom. One such group of pioneers went to Ohio and founded Zoar Village, one of the most notable experiments in communal living in the nation's history.

This group of German Separatists—so named because they had broken with the established Lutheran church—left southeastern Germany to escape persecution for their religious beliefs. The Separatists thought that the church should be simple and bereft of all ceremony; they emphasized a mystical, direct relationship with God.

The hardy group of 300 arrived in Philadelphia in August 1817, and were befriended by Quakers who provided shelter and helped them find work. But it was the goal of the group and their leader, Joseph Baumeler (later Bimeler), to establish their own community in America.

They soon contracted to buy a 5,500-acre tract of land along the Tuscarawas River, agreeing to pay the purchase price over a period of 15 years. Small groups of Separatists began leaving for Ohio as soon as they could afford to move, and the first cabin in the new village was completed by December 1, 1817.

The settlers called their new community Zoar, meaning "a sanctuary from evil." Named for Lot's biblical town of refuge, the village was to be their sanctuary from religious persecution. At first, however, life for the settlers was far from heavenly.

The Zoar Garden. c. 1890.

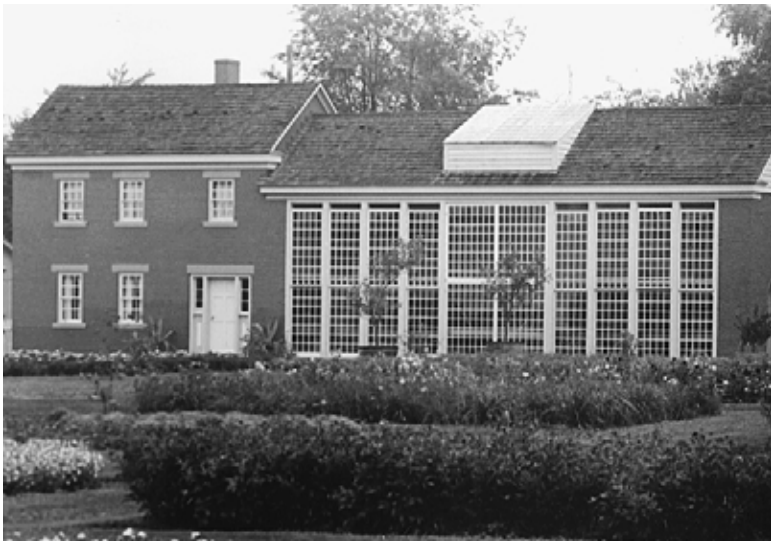
Food was scarce the first winter. Because some families had not yet cleared their land or bought tools, they had to work on neighboring farms to feed themselves. The next season, each Zoar family cultivated its own acreage, but yields were insufficient to feed themselves and pay the land debt. Thus, in 1819, the original plan of private land ownership and cultivation was scrapped and the commune was born.

Under the new system, Baumeler remained the community's leader. All property and wealth were pooled and held by an organization known as the Society of Separatists of Zoar. Each member was to follow the decisions of the society's trustees; in return, they received food, clothing, and shelter. The new communal economy, the thrift of its members, and Baumeler's business acumen enabled the society to pay its debts and build a surplus by 1834.

Zoar's political organization was simple and democratic. Men and women had equal rights. The chief ruling body was the annually-elected board of trustees. Most Zoarites had regularly-assigned tasks to perform; those who did not assembled daily to receive their assignments from the trustees.

The village grew. Crops flourished, cattle and sheep farming prospered, and new houses and shops were built. The Tuscarawas River powered a sawmill, flour mill, planing mill, and woolen mill. Brick and rope making were developed as local industries.

By the mid-1830s, Zoar was virtually self-sustaining. The farms produced more food than was needed and many products—such as flour, meat, hides, eggs, poultry, and butter—were sent to other towns for sale. The tinshop and foundry manufactured a variety of goods for general sale. The Zoarites contracted to build the portion of the Ohio & Erie Canal that crossed their land, which added to the society's income. By 1852, the society's assets were valued at more than $1 million.



The Zoar Garden House, constructed in c. 1835, houses tropical plants and a residence for the gardener. It was restored in 1870.

Skill in gardening gave Zoar one of its most interesting features: the magnificent community garden, laid out with geometric precision. Occupying an entire village square, the garden was planted to symbolize the New Jerusalem described in the twenty-first chapter of Revelation. A Norway spruce at the center of the garden symbolized eternal life; circling the spruce was an arborvitae hedge, representing heaven. Twelve juniper trees, one for each of the apostles, formed a third concentric circle. A circular walk enclosed this area, with 12 radiating pathways symbolizing the 12 tribes of Israel.

The basic religious beliefs shown in the garden's design bound the Zoarites together, as did Joseph Baumeler's leadership. When Baumeler died in 1853, however, the society never fully recovered from the blow. Although the Zoarites lived and labored as a communal body, Baumeler had been the group's spiritual leader and business administrator even before their arrival in America. His energy and foresight largely were responsible for Zoar's success. After his death, the people's initiative gradually declined.

The social and economic environment around the village was changing as well, and this, too, had a major impact on the community. The coming of the railroad to Zoar in the 1880s brought more of the outside world, and the rise of mass-production industries made Zoar's smaller businesses obsolete. With easier access to the outside world, younger members drifted away to make their fortunes and religious orthodoxy decreased.

In 1898, with a growing number of Zoarites expressing their desire to disband and divide any remaining assets, the society was dissolved. Common property was divided among the members, with each receiving about 50 acres and $200.

For 30 years after the dissolution of the Zoar Society, the village became just another rural Ohio town. However, in 1929, under pressure from the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers to move the town to higher ground to accommodate a nearby flood-control dam, the villagers began to recognize their heritage and restored the central garden and opened a museum. A levee was built instead.

The Ohio Historical Society assumed management of the museum and garden in 1942, and began to acquire more buildings. Since then, it has continued to reconstruct and restore parts of the village as it appeared in the period of its greatest prosperity. Ten buildings are open seasonally as a historic site. Other historic buildings are shops, bed-and-breakfast inns, and private residences.

Since 1965, the State of Ohio and the Ohio Historical Society have undertaken an extensive restoration program of original structures built by the Zoar Separatists. Five buildings have been restored and three reconstructed on their foundations since that time. The additions to the site enable our visitors to get a clearer picture of life in Zoar during the 19th century. We have also been able to learn extensively about the German vernacular construction techniques used by the Separatists. We have attempted to restore these buildings as accurately as possible while making them accessible for modern visitation. This year, we are restoring the 1833 Zoar Hotel as a visitor and education center. We are now restoring the exterior and hope to receive state capital improvement funds for the interior and exhibits in 2002.

Restored or reconstructed buildings include Number One House (1835) used first as a nursing home for elderly residents, then as home to the Society's trustees; the Magazine (1851), storehouse and distribution point for community goods; the Kitchen (1835) where meals for Number One House residents were cooked on a

kettle-oven; the Greenhouse (1835) which overlooks the formal garden, also restored, and is home to tropical plants; the Bimeler Museum (1868) which illustrates the society's last decade; the Bakery (1845) where the community's bread was prepared; the Tinshop (1825), a half-timbered structure where metalware was made; the Wagon Shop (1840) where the wheelwright fashioned vehicles; the Blacksmith Shop (1834), where iron implements were forged and horses were shod; and the Dairy (1841), where milk from the society's 100 cows was transformed into butter and cheese.

Zoar Village State Memorial, administered by the Ohio Historical Society, is open from April through October. It is located on State Route 212, three miles southeast of I-77, south of Canton. Write to: Zoar Village, Box 404, Zoar, OH 44697; call 1-800-874-4336; or visit <www.ohiohistory.org/places/zoar> for information or a list of special events.

Kathleen M. Fernandez is Site Manager of Zoar Village State Memorial and Fort Laurens State Memorial for the Ohio Historical Society.

Photos courtesy Ohio Historical Society.

Rustin Quaide

Origins of the Utopian Idea

The western idea of utopia originates in the ancient world, where legends of an earthly paradise lost to history (e.g., Eden in the Old Testament, the mythical Golden Age of Greek mythology), combined with the human desire to create, or recreate, an ideal society, helped form the utopian idea. The Greek philosopher Plato (427?-347 BC) postulated a human utopian society in his Republic, where he imagined the ideal Greek city-state, with communal living among the ruling class, perhaps based on the model of the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta. Certainly the English statesman Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) had Plato's Republic in mind when he wrote the book Utopia (Greek ou, not + topos, a place) in 1516. Describing a perfect political and social system on an imaginary island, the term "Utopia" has since entered the English language meaning any place, state, or situation of ideal perfection. Both the desire for an Edenic Utopia and an attempt to start over in "unspoiled" America merged in the minds of several religious and secular European groups and societies.

The 19th-century utopian sects can trace their roots back to the Protestant Reformation. Following the early Christian communities, communal living developed largely within a monastic context, which was created by Saint Benedict of Nursia (480?-543?AD), who founded the Benedictine order. During the Middle Ages a communal life was led by several lay religious groups such as the Beghards and Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit. In allowing the sexes to live in the same community, these societies differed from the earlier Catholic and Orthodox monasteries.

The Protestant Reformation, which originated with the teachings of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564), changed western European societal attitudes about the nature of religion and work. Luther broke with the medieval conception of labor, which involved a hierarchy of professions, by stressing that all work was of equal spiritual dignity. Calvin's doctrines stressed predestination, which stated that a person could not know for certain if they were among God's Elect or the damned. These theological ideals about work were stressed in the various American religious utopian societies.

In the wars and general disorder following the establishment of Protestant sects in northern Europe, many peasants joined Anabaptist and millenarianist groups, some of which, like the Hutterian Brethren, practiced communal ownership of property. To avoid persecution several of these groups immigrated to America, where the idea of communal living developed and expanded.

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